**Uthnau Site Visit Report: 14/15 Jul 2015 by Swati**

**Background:**

This was a sequel to the 2014 site visit. The project stewards Binay and Satyajit, and I had a telecon on 28 Jun. The 5 main questions Binay wanted me to look into are:

1. Restructuring plan with new teachers for Moch Awrah and how it impacts continuity of initiatives in last couple of year, how it add to current capabilities and existing teachers transition
2. Effectiveness of kids studying outside of Birbhum area and check & balances on families that adopt them
3. Future growth possibilities and current effectiveness of urban roof top farming
4. Current state of non-education program run by Uthnau
5. Given big losses from last year, how is Uthnau coping with it and if it is back to normal and thriving? How many children per year etc.

**Disclaimer:**

I got super busy with work and am writing this after months. So some details are a bit hazy. But I will capture the basic situation.

**Visit:**

This was a one-day visit on Tue 14 Jul or Wed 15 Jul.

Kunal, Arun da, Ruby Hembrom (who was going to teach English) along with 2 more people and I went to Uthnau.

It was past summer and so we didn’t get roasted. Manj Awrah was usual. The teachers seemed a bit more open to feedback and suggestion. Sadi, the remaining ray of hope, was there with her usual caring and balanced nature. Mohan, in particular, seemed more receptive – possibly because his own son is growing up and he feels a stronger need to learn to teach better. I had a longer discussion with Kalpona and got a bit concerned. There was a short meeting with Baburchi, Sadi and Mohan regarding who is teaching what and the changes they have brought in. Sadi and Kalpona taught at Bangla and English respectively for all children. Mohan and Baburchi were in charge of Math and EVS respectively for all age groups. However, Mohan was not able to bond well with younger children. So they decided that he would be teaching Math and EVS to the older kids while Baburchi would do the same for the younger ones. Sonamuni was back and was in charge of handicrafts etc. in the afternoon.

Concern with Kalpona and English:

Kalpona has not received much English training. At least it didn’t appear to be so. She was basically teaching from the cheap books that are common across rural Bengal. These books are often filled with wrong pronunciation and wrong meaning and she was teaching exactly that! And she never bothered to check with anyone else.

The English training that Uthnau had received from Auroville did not get transmitted to Kalpona and Uthnau has completely lost the benefit of it.

There was also some tension between Kalpona and the rest – the former being more professional, attending anganwari in the morning and then coming a bit late but giving her time solidly while she is in Manj Awrah; while the rest are definitely there (at Manj Awrah) longer time-wise but then what are they doing the whole time.

In the afternoon, Ruby took an English class with mixed age group of children. She engaged the children well and reminded me of some of the good English teachers I had come across. I had some discussion with her afterwards and she agreed that she needs to interact with Kalpona regarding English. Ruby hadn’t disclosed that she knew Bangla, so the children would have had to communicate with her in English only. However she herself being a Santhal could speak Santhali – this would make it easier for her to teach the Santhal kids.

In the evening, I had few other rounds of discussion with Kunal regarding roof-top gardening and other non-Manj Awarh matters. Mohan dropped me at the station next morning.

**Discussion points from the project-stewards:**

1. **Restructuring plan with new teachers for Moch Awrah and how it impacts continuity of initiatives in last couple of year, how it add to current capabilities and existing teachers transition**

It’s all in a very nascent stage. Ruby and her teaching English is the only solid thing where I see potential. English is something everyone wants to learn. Also that enables adibashi people to utilize the reservations for them in various jobs, including govt jobs. Uthnau might have different schemes for children and adults to learn English. For adults, it can be few months residential crash course. They were supposed to figure out how frequently Ruby would visit, for what duration and the possibility of skype interactions for the remaining time.

The other such plans that Kunal had includes Mohan and Baburchi teaching various skills (small machine repair-work and musical instruments respectively) to the youth. I have my doubts on how much demand there would be for such skill-based courses and how well Uthnau can pull it off.

1. **Effectiveness of kids studying outside of Birbhum area and check & balances on families that adopt them**

This is irrelevant since Kunal’s is the only family that has taken in any such kid

1. **Future growth possibilities and current effectiveness of urban roof top farming**

From what I gathered, there were some losses but a well-wisher came forward to cover all that and provided seed-money to experiment further. The issue is that the flat-owners were getting over conscious regarding whether this would damage the roof. So Kunal is now looking at hospitals etc. non-residential places and also small-scale residential set ups where he has to convince one household at a time.

As always, the ideas are great. But it is the execution and an economically successful and viable process that Uthnau fails to achieve. So given their past legacy, I would like to see something concrete without anyone covering the loss, before I can label it as effective.

1. **Current state of non-education program run by Uthnau**

There are few things happening here and there e.g. Kalpona leading a group of women in making and selling muri locally and another group becoming a performing band of traditional dancers under Sonamuni’s training – the 2nd group is getting invited to perform at different local festivals. Both are providing some income to the women involved.

However the people’s movement that was the life-blood of Uthnau seemed to have dried up. It seemed as if Uthnau, other than just Kunal, was completely cut off. Kunal was still trying to work with the traditional Santhal society and their structures of Majhis (heads of the society). But everything appeared very loose.

1. **Given big losses from last year, how is Uthnau coping with it and if it is back to normal and thriving? How** **many children per year etc.**

Uthnau must restructure its governing body since the president passed away and the treasurer resigned several years back (not sure if they had an interim treasurer meanwhile). Kunal was going to look into that.

I didn’t get much sense that number of children etc. had changed much from last year or was going to change in near future.

**Overall impression:**

It is very difficult for me to jot this down as part of an Asha site visit only. So I will attempt to capture the broad picture which impacts the smaller aspects.

After several phases, (i) before Kunal went to jail (till 2002) (ii) post jail (2002-2005) (iii) expansion phase (2005-2008) (iv) success (2009-2012) and (v) post success (2012 onwards) [all time-lines are approximate] this is the 1st time Uthnau has only one leader Kunal.

2 main features of Kunal’s leadership:

1. Sangharsh – Uthnau has learnt how to criticise, how to challenge and how to object very well. These are all important. But they have not learnt how to take responsibility and be accountable for one’s actions.
2. “Weak” leadership – Kunal always presented himself strategically as the weak leader who can be joked about and laughed at. So earlier Jaya di or I used to give the suggestions and “advices” which if coming from Kunal would be brushed off. Now Kunal has no such channel. Also it has become quite clear to the few people still in the org, that actually it is a strong leadership and not a weak one. They know Kunal’s words are final. Though there is room to discuss and argue I don’t know how much effective they are.

Right now Uthnau needs more of Nirman than Sangharsh. While Kunal excels at the latter, the former is not his cup of tea – and he knows it. So something very basic is missing. IMO, it can’t come from within. It needs to come from someone/somewhere else. Time will tell how much and how long Ruby and Uthnau will walk together. But there does lie a hope.

Swati

25 Oct 2015